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ORIGIN AND EARLY HISTORY

OF THE

FIRST PARISH, SHARON,

MASSACHUSETTS.

7551.226

A SERMON,

Preached on the occasion of the 150th Anniversary of the Formation of the Church, July 6, 1890,

BY GEORGE WILLIS COOKE,

Then Minister of the Parish.

PUBLISHED BY REQUEST.

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ANNIVERSARY OF FIRST PARISH,

SHARON.

THE history of a parish or church is, to a large extent, the history of the men and women of whom it is composed, for their individuality enters into it as the largest element in determining its character, and in shaping the events in its existence. It cannot rise above their level of conduct and aspiration, nor can its real life be other than that which grows out of the genuine beliefs of its members.

The country church may offer little that is of special interest to the consideration of the historian; but out of it the true life of the community is being shaped to no small extent. In its own way it does as true a work, and a work quite as important, as that which is accomplished by the city church amid more conspicuous surroundings. It may be said of it, however, that it comes closer to the heart of the people, is more to them in the shaping of their characters, than the city church ever can be, large or popular as it may be or widely famed.

Whoever would know the real history of New England, and that which is most characteristic in the lives of its people, must turn to the parishes nestled all over the country, and study the minute details of their old and musty records. Nothing wonderful will he find; but he will come upon that which has made the people of New England what they are, as he can find it nowhere else. He will find independence of thought, high moral purpose, integrity of character, sturdy love of liberty, and a manly refusal to submit to the dictation of priest or king.

We may not love the doctrines of the Puritans, but we have inherited from them qualities of mental temper and moral purpose which are our best equipment in life. As we trace the history of religious life and thought from their time to our own we learn many things, that a steady process of growth has been going forward, that the subsoil of our life of today we owe to them, that generation after generation has advanced along the lines which their deepest life indicated as the true ones for the development of Christian character, and that if we would go forward to better things in the future we must not cut ourselves off from the rich inheritance of the past.

It is such considerations as these that make it worth our while to review the history of our own parish, not that we may boast of the things it has accomplished or of what our fathers did and were ; but that we may profit by the experiences of the past, and that we may gather new courage for the work of the future. If others have wrought well we have entered into their labors, and we owe it to their memories that their work does not fail because of our neglect or because of our want of faith. The more precious the inheritance the greater and more sacred the duty laid upon us to continue the work others have begun so well.

In 1637 the town of Dorchester received from the General Court a grant of land stretching from its own territory to that of Plymouth Colony. It was called "the new grant," and it included the present towns of Canton, Stoughton, Sharon, and Foxborough, as well as parts of Dedham and Wrentham. Not long after this region began to be settled, and in 1707 it was formed into a separate precinct, though it was not organized until 1716. A church was gathered in 1717, and a meeting-house was built at what is now called Canton corner.

The settlement of the region contained in the present town of Sharon began during the last quarter of the

seventeenth century. The records of the town of Dorchester for the year 1661 contain this entry:

"Upon the request of sevrall of ye inhabitance of Dorchester for to erect a village at Pole plaine or ther abouts. It was voted that ye towne of Dorchester was willing to grant sufficient land at ye place afore sayed (if it be there) to acomodate twenty or thirtie families if soe many appeare sufficient to carry on church and commonwealth worke and that they p'pound ther tearmes and agree with such as the towne shall appoint for that end:

"Voted the same day that ye parties desiring ye villiage afore sayed repaire to ye select men in convenient time and p'pound ther termes and the selectmen are desired to attend ye same and p'pose it to ye towne for full conformation."

As the Dorchester records do not again mention this project probably not a sufficient number of persons were ready to settle at Pole plaine to form the desired village. It is certain however, that before the end of the century farms were occupied and houses built. Tradition says that the first settlement was made near Wollomolopoag pond by a family of the name of Billings. By this family the old Billings tavern was erected, which was the first house of any pretensions in the neighborhood.*

When the Stoughton church, now the Unitarian church at Canton corner, was formed in 1717, two persons then residents of Pole plaine owned the covenant, and were among the twenty persons forming the first membership of that church. These were Joseph Hewins and Benjamin Esti, both of whom afterwards took a prominent

*Ebenezer Billings resided here during the last quarter of the seventeenth century and until his death in 1718. His son Richard graduated at Harvard College in the class of 1698, the first college boy from this town. In the diary of Judge Sewall, frequent mention is made of Billings' Tavern where the judge stopped on his circuits. Madam Sarah Knight gives a humorous account of her stay in this tavern on her horseback ride to New York in 1704. When Mr. Billings died, a eulogistic notice was published in the Boston News Letter. His gravestone in the West burying ground is the oldest lettered stone in Sharon.

part in connection with the parish formed at Pole plaine. Others living in the same region became members of the Stoughton church; but the distance from the meeting-house operated to limit the number joining the church as well as those attending the services held in the meeting-house. Owing to this difficulty of going so far to church the northerly part of the precinct, so early as 1727, sought to join with the southerly part of Dedham in forming a separate parish, which they secured a few years later.

Tradition says that for several years meetings for religious worship were held in the Billings tavern. A meeting-house was built in 1737, though it was nothing more than a frame covered with clapboards, and with a floor laid. The pastor of the Stoughton church, Rev. Samuel Dunbar, made this record in 1737-38:

"July 23. This Lord's Day about 30 Families drew off from the Public Worship in this place to ye New Meeting House on ye Plain at Masspoag. Young Mr. Burnal preached among ym Ye Lord give grace & Truth in this town & precinct."

In 1740 Mr. Dunbar chronicled the forming of a second church:

"May 1th. This evening the Chh. voted ye following Bretheren and Sisters of ye Chh. a Dismission and Recommendation in order to be gathered into a Distinct & Particular Chh. in ye 2d Precinct of this Town: Viz Joseph Hewins, Benjamin Esti, Peletiah Whittemore, Eleazer Puffer, Jeremiah Fuller, Joseph Hewins, Junior, John Noyes, Ebenezer Hewins, John Smith, Eleazer Hawse, Benja. Savel, Daniel Richards, Benj. Esti, Junior, Ebenr. Esti, Samuel Cowmings, Clifford Belcher, Elizabeth Whittemore, Mary Savel, Rebeckeh Esti, Elizabeth Puffer, Harriet Fuller, Hannah Hewins, Judith Hewins, Mary Hawse, Martha Esti."

The establishment of a separate church, however, was not unattended with difficulties. The town and the old parish opposed the separation, and when a petition was

carried to the General Court they successfully resisted it. A committee, consisting of John Hixson and Benjamin Johnson, again represented the people with a petition for separation, in 1740; and in this document they distinctly set forth their reasons for wishing to have a parish of their own. They said:

"Whereas, by the Providence of the all-disposing God, our lots are fallen to us at so great a distance from the Public worship of God in the North part of the said town, that your petitioners cannot ever, without great difficulty, attend the public worship of God; Wherefore we have petitioned the town once and again, to be eased of the great difficulties we now labor under, but have been by them rejected, notwithstanding the great length of way which some of your petitioners live from the public worship in the North Part, about eight or nine miles; and in consideration of our great duty to attend the public worship of God, not only ourselves, but by our families and children, which, by the blessing of God, are greatly increased; Therefore your petitioners have of late petitioned this Honorable Court to be set off a separate Town or Precinct, but this Honorable Court did not see cause to grant the petition. The reason, as we humbly conceive, was the answers to the petition, which were wrong and erroneous."

The petitioners then ask for a committee of the General Court to investigate their needs, in order, as they say, "to see with your own eyes." They define the limits of the desired parish or precinct, and say that "since we have had preaching among us, it has encouraged some well minded persons to come and settle within the limits herein petitioned." They also say that "as your petitioners are obliged by conscience and law to attend the public worship of God, they have, by a free contribution, maintained preaching among themselves for a considerable time." While thus providing for preaching they were still obliged

to pay the church tax to the parish with which they were still legally connected.

To this petition the town made answer that craft had been used by the petitioners, that the minister was owed by the town about eighty pounds, and that the town had built a road at a cost of a hundred pounds expressly to enable them to attend church. After the committee of the General Court had investigated, it reported in favor of forming a separate precinct. A bill to that effect, was passed, which was signed by Governor Jonathan Belcher, July 2, 1740; and the second precinct or parish in Stoughton was thus formed.

It would appear from the records of the first church that, while the town was opposed to the formation of a second precinct the members of the church were favorable to the demands for a separate church organization. They certainly dealt with the new parish and church in a most friendly manner. In 1741 Mr. Dunbar made this record:

"Jan. 13, 1741-42. The Pastor & Deacons ye Delegates of ye Chh. assisted in ye Ordaining Council, & Ordained ye Rev. Mr. Philip Curtis, Pastor of ye Chh. in ye 2d Precinct began with Prayer, Mr. Nath. Walter, of Roxbury, preached from Acts xx. 28. I gave ye charge, and Mr. Payson, of Walpole, gave ye Right hand of Fellowship."

The next year this entry was made:

"June 4th Stayed ye Chh. Voted to give to our Younger Sister Chh. in order to furnish ye Table of ye Lord among ym One Flaggon, 2 Tankards 1 Large Cup and ye Little Cups."

The records of the church which was formed in 1740 have long since disappeared, no one knows where. Something of interest for us they must have contained, which is now lost past recovery. The records of the parish are yet in a good state of preservation, as is the record of baptisms, church admissions, births, marriages and deaths, and intentions of marriage, kept by Mr. Curtis. A part

of the treasurer's book also exists, and several papers of interest and importance. These several documents, together with other sources of information, contain material for a fairly full account of the organization of the parish and church, and their subsequent history.

The first meeting of the Second Precinct in Stoughton, as it was legally called, was held in the meeting-house July 18, 1740. John Hixon was chosen moderator, Jeremiah Fuller, clerk, and John Hixon, Joseph Everet and Jedediah Morse were chosen assessors. At a meeting held August sixth "it was voted that John Hixon, Ephraim Payson & Daniel Richards be a committee to manage the prudentials of the precinct. The same day it was voted that the precinct would maintain preaching in the meeting-house where it now stands, and that a tax of one hundred pounds be granted, to be Raised on polls and estates to support the same and other necessary charges arising in the precinct."

The vote in regard to preaching in the meeting-house "where it now stands" is accounted for by the record of a meeting held September eleventh, when "a copy of a petition of Ebenezer Billing, Samuel Billing and Elkanah Billing and others was read, and the precinct voted that John Hixon, Joseph Everit, Daniel Richards, Thomas Randal and Jeremiah Fuller should be a committee to make answer thereto." Evidently the place where the meeting-house was located was not central enough to suit all or there were other objections that do not appear on the records. At a meeting held December seventeenth "it was put to vote to see if it was the mind of the meeting to confirm the meeting-hous for the public worship of god in the place wher it now stands and it was voted in the afarmetive." Probably some feeling grew out of this question of location, for at the next meeting of the precinct Elkanah Billing was elected moderator, but declined to serve. The persons desiring the change of location lived within what is now the town of Foxboro.

The majority of the precinct having decided upon the location most desirable for their meeting-house, the precinct proceeded to complete it and to use the fifty pounds already voted for that purpose. The next thing to be done was to secure a minister, which the precinct set about doing at a meeting held September third, 1741. Several persons had been heard with a view to setttlement, the names of which are given in the treasurer's book. These were Revd. Mr. John Ballantine, who preached in July, 1740, Revd. Mr. Noah Clap, who preached in August and September, Rev. Mr. Ebenezer Gay, who preached the next five months following. It appears that Mr. Curtis preached his first sermon in the parish June seventh, 1741, and that after being heard for three months he was invited to settle. The record says "the same day the precinct chose the Rev. mr. Philip Curtice to be their mineter. the same day the precinct granted a gratuety of two hundred pounds to the Revd. mr. Philip Curtice to incurag his settiling among them, it was voted that the precinct would give the Revd. mr. Philip Curtice one hundred and fifty pounds anneally for his salery provided he settels with them as their minester." A committee was appointed to communicate to Mr. Curtis the wishes of the precinct, to whom he gave the following answer, after due consideration :

"To the Committee appointed by the second Precinct in Stoughton to present me with their Call of me to the Pasteral ofice among them to be Communicated
Honed and Beloved

Since it hath pleased ye Soverign Jehovah in whose hands are ye harts of ye children of men and who inclins and disposes them as he pleaseth to incline your Harts to me (who am less than ye lest of all Saints) so as to give me so unanimous a Call to the work of the Evangelical ministry among you and you have made me proposalls for my setelment & Support with you I hereby signify to you that I do accept of your Call & of your proposals in it have-

ing Duly Considered (as I have been abil) your call I am ready and willing to come & preach ye gospel to you as Christ shall enable me. I am willing to spend and be spent for you with this purpose I undertake the great work of the gospel minestry among you & expect a comfortable support among you and that while I am sowing unto you spiritual things I may keep so much of your Carnal Things as shall be needful for me to support me in my office and now wishing and praying yt we may be mutual Blessings to each other & that the gospel may flourish among us and earnestly begging an Interest in your Prairs to god for me that I may be an able faithful & successful minester of Jesus Christ I subscribe myself your servant in the work of the ministry

PHILIP CURTIS Roxbury Novr 30th 1741."

Having settled a minister, the parish fell into even-going ways, and the records show little that is of special interest. At each spring meeting the minister was voted his salary and fire-wood, and the usual precinct officers were elected. Three or four times during the next few years requests were made by one or more persons to be set off to some other precinct or town. The land given by the Dorchester proprietors for ministerial purposes was a frequent subject of consideration, and the "improvement" of it was given to the minister. This land, called "Renolds misery meadow," was given by the proprietors of Dorchester for the support of the ministry in this precinct, and it was long used for that purpose.

Another subject that exercised special attention was the completion of the meeting-house. In 1744 it was voted that the places for sixteen pews be sold to the highest bidder, and that those paying the highest taxes should have the preference in bidding. The committee having this matter in charge reported :

"We the subscribers Being chosen a comtee by ye second precinct in Stoughton, to sell the places in their Meeting house for sixteen pews To the highest Bidder,

according to a vote of sd precinct passed August ye Eight 1744 : We therefore appointed the twenty second Day of ye same month for the sale of sd pews and according met, and each particular place was Bid upon seperate (or by its self) and the names of the persons that Bid the highest, and the sums they Bid (in old Tenr) and the places they chose are these which follows : viz—

	£	s	d	
Mr Benja Johnson	12	0	0,	at the Right hand of the Great Door
Mr Nathl Coney	12	0	0,	at the Left hand of the Great Door
Mr Joseph Everet	12	0	0,	at the East of the Ministerial Pew
Mr Ebenezer Hewins	12	0	0	at the Right hand of the East Door
Mr Samll Comings	12	0	0	Between Mr. Everets and Mr Hewins
Mr Thomas Randal	11	15	0	The middle place in the Row to the west side of the west Door
Mr Ephraim Payson	11	0	0	Next to ye stares on ye East side of the House
Deacon Benja Savell	10	0	0	at the Right hand of the pulpit
Mr Jeremiah Belcher	6	15	0	Next to ye stares on the west side of ye house
Mr Daniel Richards	6	15	0	at ye Left hand of the East Door
Mr Stephen Hawse	6	5	0	Next to Dn Savell at ye Right hand of ye pulpit
Dea Jeremiah Fuller	6	5	0	in the west Corner of the house
Mr John Hixson Junr	6	10	0	at the left hand of the west Door
Mr Ebenezer Capen	6	0	0	Between Mr. Johnsons and the stares

Mr Clefford Belcher	5	10	0	Between Mr Coneys and the stares
Mr Elijah Capen	5	10	0	at the Right hand of the West Door

In October of the same year five hundred pounds were voted for the purpose of completing the meeting-house, plastering the walls, casing the windows, building stairs into the galleries, finishing the galleries for use; and this work was undertaken by John Hixson and Ephraim Payson. At this meeting it was also voted that the money provided by the town for school purposes be divided into three parts for the three districts that day established. For several years persons were appointed "to take care to prevent the children from playing in the meeting house in ye Time of public Worship." Why this was necessary is explained by a vote of 1749, "that the boys under 16 years of age be ordered to set in the Three hind seats in the side galary." One other action may be noted, under date of October 15, 1764:

"Voted (togeather with the Revd mr. Curtis's consent) that the time of the intermition on the Lords Days, one year from the tenth of Sepr. 1764, be as follows viz: 6 months from ye 10 of Sepr. to ye 10 of March 1765: shall be one Hour: & from ye 10 of sd march to ye 10 of Sepr. next shall be one hour & a half."

At a meeting of the precinct held March 20, 1765, it was voted to have an article in the next Town-meeting warrant "To see if the Town will set off ye 2d Prect. in sd Town to be a distinct Town-ship or District." May 28 appointed a committee "to Solicit ye great & general Court of this provce to see if sd Court will set off the sd prect as above sd to be a Distinct Township or District by our selves as sd Court shall Order." The General Court granted the request, and town of Stoughtonham was created, with every town privilege except that of electing a representative to the General Court, which it was obliged for several years to share alternatively with the mother

town. From this date the parish and the town were identical for many years.

Having traced briefly the history of the parish or precinct we may turn back to that of the church, which was organized in May, 1740, with twenty-five members. Benjamin Savell and Jeremiah Fuller were the first deacons. Although the church records have long since disappeared the covenant of the church has been found among the papers of Mr. Curtis as written by him on the fly-leaf of a hymn-book in a small hand, and with many contractions and abbreviations. It is in these words :

"The Covenant.

"You do acknowledge the God of your fathers, the living and true God, to be your God, and do give up yourself to Him as your Creator, to love Him, obey Him, depend upon him and be happy in Him ?

You do acknowledge the Lord Jesus Christ, the only and eternally begotten Son of God, to be the only Savior and Redeemer, and do give up yourself to him, to be saved from the guilt of your sins and from the wrath of God ?

"You do acknowledge the Lord Jesus to be the alone source of the work of Redemption, and do give up yourself to him to be sanctified, comforted and guided to glory ?

"You do acknowledge us to be a true church of our Lord Jesus Christ, and do give up yourself to us to be watched over and edified in the holy faith unto salvation ?"

In the absence of the church records we learn one other fact worthy of mention, that Joseph Hewins was a Deacon in the Stoughton church, and then its leading elder. Early in 1720 that church "proceeded to vote for an Elder, and the vote fell on Deacon Joseph Hewins—a very clear vote." From the action taken three years later it would appear that he did not at first accept, for in 1723 the church meeting voted

"That the church make a fresh application of their request to Joseph Hewins to accept the Office of a Ruling

Elder in the church, accordingly such request was directed to him by the Pastor."

The Ruling Elder had equal authority with the minister, and he directed his attention especially towards the pastoral care of the church. It was a very important position, and one that showed marked religious gifts and the special confidence of his brethren. Joseph Hewins was a selectman in Stoughton, and held other positions of trust. Having held these relations to the church in Stoughton it seems curious that he was not made a deacon in the second church. Is it possible that he was made the ruling elder in the church of the second precinct? Joseph Hewins was born in 1668, and died in 1755. He has been described as "a tall, spare, grand, and dignified man, who stood in the pulpit with the minister."

In every New England parish in the eighteenth century the minister was the chief man, and he was identified with all its interests. In giving the biography of the minister the history of the parish is produced. It is from this point of view that we must look at the life of Mr. Curtis. He was the son of Samuel and Hannah Curtis, was born at Jamaica Plain, October 4, 1717, entered Harvard College in July, 1734, took his degree in 1738, became a church member under the Rev. Dr. Bowman of Dorchester, January 6, 1739, and studied theology with this pastor of his youth. He began preaching in Sharon in May, 1741, was ordained January 13, 1742, and was married to Elisabeth Bass of Dorchester, September 6, 1744. In the first year of his settlement Mr. Curtis bought of Nathan Clark forty acres of land, for which he paid two hundred and sixty-five pounds. On this land he built a parsonage which was burned in 1758. Probably in the same year it was rebuilt, and a collection was taken in the first parish to aid him in so doing. This second house built by Mr. Curtis is that now known as "the Pollard House."

In May, 1762, Mr. Curtis lost his wife; but two years later he was married to Elisabeth Randal. By his first

wife he had six children, and by the second five. He carefully provided for them all, gave them a good education, and sent them forth into the world honorable men and women. Mr. Curtis in large part educated his own children, he taught gratuitously the children of his parishioners, and he also prepared boys for college. He was a man of scholarly tastes, and there now exists among his papers a work on practical geometry, especially with reference to the construction of sun-dials. It is well written, and is fully illustrated by fine geometrical figures, skilfully drawn. He was a preacher of good ability, leaning towards Arminian views in theology, and preferred practical religion to any form of dogmatic speculation. He belonged to the liberal school of his time, was thoroughly respected by his people, who were firmly attached to him throughout his long life.

In the year 1787 the parish decided to build a new meeting-house. The old one had become unfit for longer service, and did not answer to the growing needs of the people. Mr. Curtis gave one quarter's salary for this purpose, and also one acre and one quarter of land, which he called in his deed a "meeting house spot of land;" and is that now occupied by our church and parsonage. The new house was built by Asa Clark, and was to be completed by the first of January, 1789. This house was large and high, and it had two rows of windows, galleries on three sides, a sounding-board, a wing at each end, a large double door in front, and three doors in each wing. The building of such a house indicates the general prosperity of the parish, and that none of the congregation had fallen away under the preaching of Mr. Curtis.

The work of Mr. Curtis, however, had come well on towards its end when the new house had been completed; but without any dimming of his natural powers. He died November 22, 1797, in his eighty-first year; and he had preached constantly to within a few months of his death. He was an active, faithful preacher and pastor. His record

book shows that during his ministry of fifty-five years he baptised 926 persons, married 313 couples, buried 403 persons, and admitted to church membership 264. The memory he left behind him in this town shows how well he did his work, and the lasting influence he created.

We may pause now to say that in 1775 Stoughtonham became a full town, and that soon after it made application to the General Court to have its name changed to Washington. This request was not granted, but in 1783 permission was given to adopt the name of Sharon. It took a very active and honorable part in the Revolutionary war, not being surpassed in this regard by any town about it.

Soon after the death of Mr. Curtis the town began to seek for a new pastor, which it found in the person of Jonathan Whitaker, who was graduated at Harvard in 1797. The town offered him seven hundred and fifty dollars as a settlement, and to pay him semi-annually as a salary one hundred and sixty-six dollars and sixty-six and a half cents. Mr. Whitaker accepted this offer, and was ordained February 27, 1799, the sermon being preached by Rev. Abiel Holmes of Cambridge, the father of Dr. Oliver Wendell Holmes. It has been said of Mr. Whitaker, that he "was a thorough scholar, gifted as a public speaker, devoted to his sacred calling, and eminently successful as a teacher." He made a marked impression in the town at the beginning of his ministry, was regarded with admiration by his parishioners, and was in favor in other churches. The congregations increased and new pews had to be built. He bought the house built by Mr. Curtis, married Mary Kimball of Bradford, built the L to the parsonage for school purposes, and he followed his predecessor in the work of preparing boys for college. He taught the public school of the town, and a sister of his wife opened a young ladies' school in Sharon. He took much interest in farming, and he was one of the first to introduce merino sheep into the town. He went into the field himself, and took

an active part in the operations there. Some of his neighbors said they had rather work for him for nothing than for other people for pay, because he always provided rum plentifully for his men. When the invasion of Boston was expected during the second war with Great Britain he led a company of one hundred of his parishioners to Dorchester Heights, and there assisted in throwing up earthworks. From these and other indications it is evident that Mr. Whitaker was a high-spirited, earnest man, full of resolute purpose, capable of making his way in the world, original in his methods, and out-spoken in his convictions.

A man of so much energy and resolution, in a time of great political and religious excitement, when party feeling ran high, would almost inevitably come into collision with his neighbors, if he gave a free expression to his convictions. Mr. Whitaker was a Federalist in politics, and he was bitter in his denunciations of the Democratic party. Unfortunately for him the majority of his parishioners were Democrats; and he expressed his opinions with so much vigor that he alienated his best friends. With Squire Reynolds, who was a Democrat, and one of the leading men of the parish, he had some political controversy; and a business misunderstanding also arose between them. When they chanced to meet one day the Squire said: "Mr. Whitaker, you are no more fit for a minister, than hell is for a powder house." After a moment's reflection Mr. Whitaker replied: "Squire Reynolds, you are no more fit for a justice of the peace than a chestnut burr is for an eyestone."

These differences of opinion between Mr. Whitaker and some of his parishioners led to a desire on their part not to employ him in a professional capacity. On one occasion one of his strong opponents died, and Mr. Sheldon of Easton was called in to attend the funeral. When the hour for the service arrived Mr. Whitaker appeared in the pulpit, took the hymn-book, crowded in front of Mr. Sheldon, and read out this hymn from Dr. Watts:

Behold the aged sinner go,
Laden with grief and ev'ry woe,
Down to the regions of the dead,
With endless curses on his head.

Such an act as this, however great the provocation, led to a spirit of retaliation on the part of the congregation. It was manifested when Thomas P. Richards, a man of resolution and strong will, marched into the meeting-house one Sunday morning, before the service opened, armed with a hammer and a horse-shoe, and proceeded to nail up his pew-door, and to fasten the horse-shoe on the outside. Then, as he turned to go out of the meeting-house he began to sing (and he was a fine singer) from the then popular "Ode to Science," which was written by J. Sumner in 1798—a song which expressed the intense American spirit of the Democratic party:

The British yoke and Gallic chain
Were urged upon our sires in vain;
All haughty tyrants we disdain,
And shout, long live America, America.

It is perhaps not possible for us fully to realize the bitterness of feeling which existed at that time, growing out of political controversies and the unsettled social state of the country. One incident connected with Sharon will illustrate a condition of party feeling which was very wide-spread. When a disease, somewhat similar to *la grippe* appeared in 1815 the number of the sick was very large. Although there was an excellent physician in the town the Democrats called in the services of a Dr. Mann. Soon after there appeared in the Boston *Advertiser* a letter from Sharon highly praising Dr. Mann's skill and his eminent success in treating this new disease. It was signed by the selectmen, and nine others—all Democrats. Presently a reply was published, praising Dr. Stone, the resident Sharon physician, and signed by Mr. Whitaker and several others—all Federalists.

These anecdotes are not essential to the history of the parish and church, but they very forcibly illustrate the

temper of those times, and some of the causes which led to divisions in many of the churches. Mr. Whitaker belonged to the Unitarian party in the Congregational churches of his time; and his attitude in regard to political matters increased whatever opposition there was to him on religious grounds. He was probably as outspoken in religion as in politics; and the tendency was for those who opposed him in one direction to find causes for opposition in the other. The cause of the division was by no means wholly political; but the strong and bitter party feeling in politics gave emphasis to whatever dissent there was from Mr. Whitaker's religious teachings. He had abandoned all the distinctively Calvinistic doctrines,—the deity of Christ, vicarious atonement, miraculous change of heart, and the angry wrath of God.

It was not to be expected that every one would accept the new views; and had there been no other grounds for it undoubtedly a religious division would have arisen on questions of doctrine. About 1812 a few persons became dissatisfied with the preaching of Mr. Whitaker, and not being able to secure the preaching of any other Congregational minister of more evangelical beliefs they obtained that of the Baptist minister in Medfield, Rev. William Gammell. He preached in private houses, and in 1813 organized a small society. Mr. Whitaker strongly opposed this movement, and preached a series of sermons against it. It slowly grew, however, in part because of his opposition, and in part because there was a demand for the vigorous doctrines of Calvinism. In 1817 a pastor was settled, but the services of the society for many years were held in a hall connected with their parsonage, and it was not until 1833 that a meeting-house was built. In 1818, and again in 1831, the Baptist society were given the use of the meeting-house of the First Parish for a number of months.

Up to the beginning almost of the nineteenth century the Congregational ministers in New England had enjoyed

an almost exclusive monopoly of the religious teaching of the people. Church and state were closely connected, and the town was synonymous with the parish. Changes in doctrine had slowly come about, however, and in nearly all the churches of eastern Massachusetts Calvinism had been quietly outgrown by many persons. Children were catechised and taught by the minister, and admitted to church membership without any special religious experience such as had once been thought necessary. The new methods not being acceptable to all persons it was inevitable that societies keeping more closely to the old doctrines and methods should be organized. It is not surprising, however, that the ministers who had had complete rule in the churches, and no opposition, should resent any intrusion upon their special domain, and should seek to prevent it in many ways. Their position was very different from anything that exists now, and it was not so easy for them to submit to changes which are now fully in the order of things.

The opposition to Mr. Whitaker increased until it took the form of an effort to secure his resignation or dismissal. In October, 1815, a committee was appointed to confer with him in regard to his leaving the town, but he refused to give the subject any consideration. When he was informed that a majority of the people were opposed to him, he listened to their statements. The town then voted to discontinue him as the minister, but this was not legal, and was wholly ineffective. Then Mr. Whitaker proposed to call a council of ministers and churches to consider the question; but to this action the town would not consent. Acting on the advice of the church, Mr. Whitaker determined in November that he would call a council to consider his relations to the town; and the town finally decided to join with him in calling a mutual council. This council met in the town in December, heard the case on both sides, and advised that Mr. Whitaker ask for a dismissal. February 21, 1816, he

ceased his connection with the church, the town paying him the sum of five hundred dollars. After leaving Sharon Mr. Whitaker settled in New Bedford, where he also taught an Academy. In 1823 he went to South Carolina as a teacher, and then taught and preached in Ogdensburg and Henrietta, New York. While the principal of the Monroe Academy in Henrietta, he died, in 1835.

Mr. Whitaker sold his house in Sharon to David Manley, in 1819. Manley died the next year, and his widow occupied the house until 1827, when she sold it to Mrs. Nancy Gould, then it was owned by a Mr. Esty, and it is now known as "the Pollard house."

In 1817 an invitation was extended to Rev. Thomas Rich to take the place made vacant by the withdrawal of Mr. Whitaker. Owing to poor health he was not able to accept this invitation. The controversy begun under Mr. Whitaker concerning doctrines now became earnest, and two parties grew up in the town, one Unitarian and the other Orthodox. Under this condition of things no minister was called for until the differences existing had led to the formation of another society. In 1821 those who were not satisfied with the Unitarian attitude of the majority of the parish withdrew, and formed the "Christian Society." During that year the old parish called Rev. Samuel Brimblecom to be its minister, and the new society called Rev. Joseph B. Felt. Mr. Brimblecom was ordained on the 18th of December, and Mr. Felt on the 19th. The spirit of controversy did not quickly subside, however, and various small matters continued to keep alive the feeling of bitterness and rivalry. The deacons of the church joining the new society carried with them the church records and communion service, and on their refusal to return them the controversy grew warmer. When the meeting-house of the Christian Society was destroyed by fire probably both records and communion service were consumed with it.

Out of this action in regard to the baptismal and com-

munion service grew an amusing incident. When a son of Jonathan Cobb was presented September 23, 1828, at the old meeting-house for baptism, application was made to the Orthodox Society for the use of the christening basin. It was promised, but at last refused. A pudding-dish was borrowed, and used in its stead.

These controversies of the past, real and vital to those who took part in them, must seem to us not wholly justified on either side, for while most of the men and women concerned acted conscientiously, the outcome has not been good for the community or helpful to the growth of Christian charity. In these days we have found a better way; the way of Christian union, and the active co-operation of all for the advancement of righteousness and truth in the world.

It is very easy to understand one effect of such a controversy as this, however sincere and truth-seeking the disputants may have been. In 1810 the town was united in one church, the meeting-house was full every Sunday, and the religious interests of the town were faithfully administered. In 1820 three societies existed, each of them small, not one of them strong enough to support a minister, and with bitter rivalries existing between them. Probably each alike was at fault for the existence of this state of things, but whoever was to blame the crippling effect of it has been felt deeply in the town from that day to this. The work that might have been well done by one religious society has been poorly done by three. The energies which ought to have been given to education, charity and Christian helpfulness have been used in keeping alive three struggling societies. Are we yet ready to profit by the mistakes of the past? The history we have been looking into ought to teach us the folly of religious controversy.

The population of Sharon in 1820 was not far from one thousand, and this number of persons was called upon to support three churches. As a result we find frequent

changes in ministers in all of the societies. Mr. Brimblecom remained in the town until 1826. He was succeeded by Rev. Jacob Norton in 1829, who remained for two years. The meeting-house having become old and too large for the congregation, the present house was built in 1842. At this time the old controversy was renewed in the form of a claim that the town owned the old meeting-house and the church land; but it was ascertained that the town had no claim of this kind. Of a more interesting character are the lines written when the old house was destroyed, by Mr. Jeremiah Gould, then one of the most active workers in the parish. He cleverly parodied George P. Morris' "Woodman, Spare that Tree," in his

LAMENT FOR THE OLD CHURCH IN SHARON.

Workman, the old church spare.
I pray thee, spare thy blows.
In youth I worshipped there,
There in that ancient house.
'Twas our forefathers' hands
That reared its sacred wall.
There, workman, let it stand;
I would not see it fall.

That old familiar desk,
Whose glory and renown,
Is spread from east to west;
And wouldst thou take it down?
Workman, forbear thy blows;
Rend not its oaken ties.
O spare that ancient house,
Now towering to the skies.

When but a little boy
I trod its sacred shades;
In thankfulness and joy,
There I oft have prayed.
My mother led me there,
My father pressed my hand;
Forgive this foolish tear,
But let that old house stand.

But why lament its fall,
Its glory is passed away;

Its steeple and its wall
Are marked with sad decay.
Tho' doomed to disappear,
Another will take its place.
Still, I can't stay the tear
That's trickling on my face.

The building of a meeting-house gave new life to the Unitarian parish, for Samuel Pettes was ordained May 8, 1844, the sermon being preached by Dr. Lothrop of Boston. At this time the number of church members was twelve, which was soon after increased by nine. Mr. Pettes was the pastor until 1847, when he was succeeded by Rev. James L. Stone, who remained four years and a half. September 22, 1852, Thomas Hills Pons was ordained, the sermon being preached by Rev. Convers Francis. He remained a little more than a year, and was succeeded in 1854 by Rev. Norwood Damon, who was the minister for two years. With the first of January, 1857, Rev. C. C. Sewall began a connection with the parish which lasted for five years. Beginning in 1868 Rev. George W. Stacy was the minister for two years and a half. Mr Tyndall, Mr. Wills and Mr. Todd succeeded during the next few years. In 1881 Rev. William C. White began his connection with the parish, and he was succeeded by Rev. C. C. Carpenter and Rev. N. P. Gilman. The present pastorate began in October, 1887, and has already lasted longer than any since 1862. [It continued until November, 1891]. In October, 1888, the Sunnay School was re-organized, and a Unity Club was formed during the same month.

For the last seventy years this parish has had many things with which to contend ;—a number of churches too great for the population of the town, the removal of nearly all its young life to other localities, the dying out of old and once prosperous families, and the lessening of business in the town, owing to its concentration in large

towns and cities. In recent years a more prosperous outlook has come, with the increase of population, and the adoption of new methods. By unity of purpose, charity in regard to minor details, and sympathetic co-operation for the common good, this parish may revive to all its old activity and usefulness. It has done a good work in the past, and by the right motives and means it can do good work in the future.

Our fathers believed in God, in duty, and in immortality; and therefore they wrought faithfully and well. It is not for us to mourn because the devotion and unity they enjoyed are not ours, but to work in the present time in such a manner that what ought to be done shall be done at our hands. It is not size of congregation which makes the worth of religion, but fidelity to the inward spirit, and lowly listening to the eternal voice. It is not a large salary which gives life to a church, but unity of purpose, harmony of feeling, and a common aim towards purity of life.

No good can come from this recital of the history of our parish unless we gain from it greater faith in the things for which it has ever stood, and more of earnest desire that we ourselves may realize those things of the spirit of life which enter into men to make them wise in conduct. The true lessons of the past will come to us only when we face the future with hope and loyalty, with resolution and courage. Here is good work to be done, if we will put our hands to it, work together as one man for humanity, and for that Divine Life which is mighty to help all who labor in the spirit of love and truth. If we sit still because we are few, others will press towards the goal, to win the prize of having served their fellows. If we have not faith in the great eternal verities of life, so that they lay hold upon us with a mighty power of conviction, others will do what we have not courage to accomplish.

Very precious things of faith and life have been given us as our heritage, and these we are not willing to

lose. True and precious souls have gone before us, who have walked with God in duty and love; and these we will follow after as best we can. The things which have lifted them above the pain and discontent of life, to glorious heights of spiritual vision, where all that is pure and righteous abides forever, shall be ours, that we also may be as a light set on a hill to those who are to come after us. We are not to mourn for the past but to labor for that future which is to belong to our children.